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Response

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I have long taught classes in the impact of human culture on the Earth's environment. I have looked at the results of overgrazing on terrestrial ecosystems. I study the changes to streams and lakes wrought by anthropogenic pollution. I consider this work challenging and important. But it has not been until more recently that I have come to believe that art and narrative can be critical to understanding human interactions with the environment.

More than a decade ago, I learned the value of thinking about folklore the hard way. I started teaching an interdisciplinary class in sustainable development—with a folklorist. Suzanne Lundquist is a specialist in Native American studies at BYU. She is also an expert in personal narrative and literature.

As we began teaching our course together, I was constantly pushed—or dragged—into new places. Suzanne sees the world as a collection of texts and narratives, all available for reading and interpretation by thoughtful people. As a biologist, I have always been interested in the natural world, but Suzanne opened my thinking. I began to be interested not only in the interactions of humans in ecosystems, but in the narratives associated with those interactions. And I began to realize the interpretation of human interactions with natural places creates the way in which those interactions occur. Worldview structures actions structures worldview.

A new way of looking at the world opened to me as Suzanne and I took students to Latin America repeatedly during summer terms to interact with local peoples. During the day we worked side by side with Tarahumara

or Ayamara Indians, during the evening we talked with them about the meaning of their universe. During the day we began to understand more about why they worked a certain way or wanted to complete a certain project, during the evening we talked about art to learn more about their lives. During the day we came to understand why they kept certain livestock, during the evening we talked about stories and listened to music.

Day by day our glimpse of their universe expanded. Ecologists talking with potters talking with folklorists talking with farmers, all trying to understand each other, bridging philosophical and cultural distances with our stories. Pretty heady and exciting learning.

So, I'm on the same page when William Ferris says creativity "is being able to think outside the box we're taught to operate in, whether that is a family, or a field of study, or a profession.... Creativity is being able to take all the best advice that you're given, and then to see beyond that advice." And for me, folklore has been one of the strongest catalysts for learning creativity, developing the cross-cultural, extra-curricular expansive ideas that come when thoughtful people examine their universe.

I couldn't be happier that the two most important federal arts agencies in the country are led by folklorists, William Ivey of the NEA and William Ferris of the NEH. Their perspectives on the arts and humanities are likely to be fertile, their notions on creativity generative and enlivening. In the face of grave challenges for the NEA and NEH in the future, let's hope the perspectives of these two folklorists may bring the breath of air to blow through Congress, clearing away some of the suspicion and hostility toward the arts and humanities that seem to have lodged there.